

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. Method for operating a food court, the food court comprising a plurality of restaurants, the method comprising:

- 5 a) order step for automated acceptance for each customer of a respective customer's order of selected menu items from one or more of the restaurants;
- b) payment step for automated acceptance of payment from each customer in one or more forms selected by the customer for the customer's order;
- 10 c) advising step of electronically advising each restaurant of selected menu items from the restaurant in each customer's order;
- d) service step of each restaurant preparing selected menu items from the restaurant for each customer's order and making the selected menu items available for delivery to the customer; and
- 15 e) accounting step for automated accounting of sales revenue for menu items sold by each restaurant.

2. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein each customer utilizes an order touch screen for the order step.

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3. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the order step generates an order receipt containing a respective order code for each customer's order and the payment step includes acceptance of the order code from the customer.

4. Method recited in Claim 3 wherein the order code for each customer's order is an order bar code and the payment step includes scanning the order bar code.

5. Method recited in Claim 1 wherein the order step for each customer includes
5 sensing a biometric feature of the customer for order identification purposes and the payment step includes sensing the biometric feature of the customer to identify the order for which payment is to be made.

6. Method as recited in Claim 5 wherein the service step for each customer includes
10 sensing the biometric feature of the customer to prevent order mis-delivery and theft.

7. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein each customer utilizes a payment touch screen for the payment step for selection of the forms of payment.

15 8. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the payment step includes sensing a biometric feature and generating a biometric code for each customer and using the biometric code to confirm the identity of the customer and the customer's authorization to make payment in the forms selected.

20 9. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the advising step and the service step utilize one or more restaurant touch screens in each restaurant for advising restaurant personnel of selected menu items for the restaurant for each customer's order and for allowing restaurant personnel to electronically confirm the preparation of the selected menu items.

10. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the payment step generates a payment receipt for each customer's order.

11. Method as recited in Claim 10 wherein the payment receipt includes a payment
5 code and the service step includes acceptance of the payment code to prevent order mis-delivery and theft.

12. Method as recited in Claim 11 wherein the payment code is a payment bar code
and the service step includes scanning the payment bar code.
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13. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the accounting step includes tabulation of menu item sales for each restaurant.

14. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the accounting step includes tabulation of
15 menu item sales revenue for each restaurant.

15. Method as recited in Claim 14 wherein the accounting step includes determination of each restaurant's share of the total food court revenue.

20 16. Method as recited in Claim 1 wherein the service step includes one or more employees of the restaurant, from which a selected menu item has been ordered, preparing the selection and acknowledging that the selected menu item is ready for delivery through use of a touch screen and a delivery display.

17. Method as recited in claim 1 wherein the order step and the payment step are accomplished at one or more combined order and payment stations.

18. Method as recited in claim 1 wherein the order step, the payment step, the
5 advising step, the service step and the accounting step are accomplished through the use of a central computer.

19. Method as recited in claim 1 wherein the service step includes electronically advising the customer that the selected menu items are ready for delivery.

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20. Method as recited in claim 1 wherein the service step includes delivering the order to an automated conveyor delivery system.

21. Method as recited in claim 20, wherein the automated conveyor system
15 comprises:

- a) order sensing means for order identification; and
- b) order routing means for delivering menu items of respective orders to selected delivery locations.

22. Apparatus for automated food court operation, the food court comprising a plurality of restaurants, the apparatus comprising:

- a) order means for automated self-service selection of menu items by customers from menu offerings for each restaurant;
- b) payment means for automated self-service payment by customers for orders placed;
- c) advising means for advising each restaurant of menu items ordered and menu items paid for by customers;
- d) service means for advising customers of ordered menu items which are ready for delivery; and
- e) accounting means for automated accounting of sales revenue for menu items sold by each restaurant.

23. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the order means includes an order touch screen.

24. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the order means further comprises an order printing means for generating an order receipt containing an order code and the payment means further comprises an order code input means for accepting the order code from the customer.

25. Apparatus as recited in Claim 24 wherein the order code is an order bar code and the order code input means comprises an order bar code scanner.

26. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the order means further comprises an order biometric sensing means for sensing a biometric feature of the customer for order identification purposes and the payment means further comprises a payment biometric sensing means for sensing the biometric feature of the customer to identify the order for which payment is to be made.

27. Apparatus as recited in Claim 26 wherein the service means further comprises a service biometric sensing means for sensing the biometric feature of the customer to prevent order mis-delivery and theft.

28. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the payment means includes a payment touch screen for customer selection of methods of payment.

29. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the advising means and the service means include one or more restaurant touch screens in each restaurant for advising restaurant personnel of selected menu items for the restaurant for each customer's order and for allowing restaurant personnel to electronically confirm the preparation of the selected menu items.

30. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the payment means further comprises a payment printing means for generating a payment receipt.

31. Apparatus as recited in Claim 30 wherein the payment receipt includes a payment code and the service means further comprises payment code input means for acceptance of the payment code to prevent order mis-delivery and theft.

5 32. Apparatus as recited in Claim 31 wherein the payment code is a payment bar code and the payment code input means comprises a payment bar code scanner.

33. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the accounting means includes means for generating a tabulation of menu item sales for each restaurant.

10 34. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the accounting means includes means for determining each restaurant's share of the total food court revenue.

35. Apparatus as recited in Claim 22 wherein the service means comprises individual
15 restaurant touch screens in each restaurant operably coupled to at least one delivery display screen in the dining area whereby employees of each restaurant confirm that menu items are ready for delivery.

36. Apparatus as recited in claim 22 wherein the order means and the payment means
20 are combined.

37. Apparatus as recited in claim 22 further comprising central computer means and communication means, the communication means linking the central computer means to the order means, the payment means, the advising means and the service means.

5 38. The apparatus as recited in claim 22 further comprising an automated delivery conveyor system.

39. The apparatus as recited in claim 38, wherein the delivery conveyor system comprises:

- 10 a) order sensing means for order identification; and
 b) order routing means for delivering menu items of respective orders to designated delivery locations.

40. Apparatus for automated food court operation, the food court comprising a
15 plurality of restaurants, the apparatus comprising:

- a) one or more order stations;
 b) one or more payment stations;
 c) one or more restaurant touch screens in each restaurant;
 d) one or more delivery screens;
20 e) central computer; and
 f) communication means for linking the central computer to the order stations, the payment stations, the restaurant touch screens, and the delivery screens.

41. The apparatus as recited in claim 40 further comprising an automated delivery conveyor system.

42. The apparatus as recited in claim 41, wherein the delivery conveyor system
- 5 comprises:
- a) order sensing means for order identification; and
 - b) order routing means for delivering menu items of respective orders to designated delivery locations.